WALTER H. PAGE'S CHRISTMAS LETTER TO HIS GRANDSON

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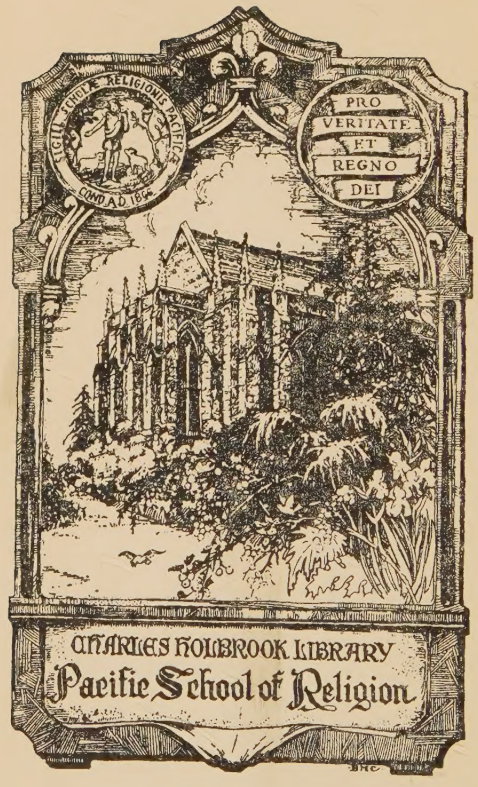

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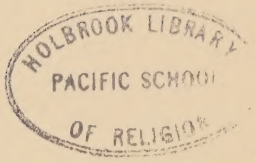

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WALTER H. PAGE'S CHRISTMAS LETTER TO HIS GRANDSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE
BY
BURTON J. HENDRICK

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1924

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Introductory Note

IT WAS one of Walter H. Page's most charming customs, manifest from his early childhood, to write letters to his relatives and intimate friends at Christmas time. Even in the most discouraging moments of his Ambassadorship he never failed to greet his chosen spirits in this fashion. Had he been inclined to ignore any Christmas season, it would have been that of 1915, for there were few reminders of Christmas on that occasion. The date, indeed, was probably the darkest in modern history. In the great war all the principles

principles and causes that Mr. Page held most sacred were at stake—democracy, individual development and independence, peace, and the British-American ideal of civilized progress. On this Christmas day of 1915 all these guiding principles seemed about to plunge into irretrievable ruin. Germany was winning the war on all fronts. Her armies were victorious in all parts of Europe and her submarines were sinking Allied shipping almost at will. British and Australian soldiers were dying by thousands in the Dardanelles,

insurrections

insurrections were threatening in India, and almost every day a new Balkan state joined its fortunes with the Central Empires. The Germans were attacking American ships with practical impunity. The great dispute aroused by the *Lusitania* sinking was still unsettled. The determination of Great Britain to keep American foodstuffs out of Germany had produced a diplomatic situation between Great Britain and the United States almost as tense as that of 1812. Indeed—strange as it seems now—one of the horrors that haunted

haunted Mr. Page's mind this Christmas was the possibility of war between the United States and Great Britain. Conditions in London were fairly in keeping with the European crisis. The winter was especially disagreeable and foggy, even for the British capital. All social life had come to an end and the atmosphere in official circles was one of deep anxiety and discouragement. Zeppelins were constantly dropping bombs upon London, and the fragments of shattered buildings not infrequently landed on the American Embassy.

Under

Under these conditions the American Ambassador, clad in his dressing gown, sat late on Christmas night before his little desk in his study at No. 6 Grosvenor Square, pouring out Christmas greetings to friends and relatives across the Atlantic —to his daughter, to his three sons, to Colonel House, to Mr. Frank N. Doubleday and his old working associates. It was characteristic of Mr. Page that he should not overlook the latest recruit to his family circle—his year-old grandson and namesake Walter Hines Page, 2nd.

Here

Here was one who suggested no thoughts of war. The baby brought to Mr. Page's mind only the philosophy of contentment and of repose. What things in common has a man of sixty and a child of one? A great poet once wrote of "crabbed age and youth" and found that they could "not live together", but to this genial statesman-philosopher, sitting there in London amid the ruins of mankind, the two extremes of life apparently had many ties of sympathy.

B. J. H.

WALTER H. PAGE'S CHRISTMAS LETTER TO HIS GRANDSON

London, Christmas, 1915.

SIR:

FOR your first Christmas, I have the honour to send you my most affectionate greetings; and in wishing you all good health, I take the liberty humbly to indicate some of the favours of fortune that I am pleased to think I enjoy in common with you.

First—I hear with pleasure that you are quite well content with yourself—not because of a reasoned conviction of your own worth, which would be mere vanity and unworthy of you, but

by

by reason of a philosophic disposition. It is too early for you to bother over problems of self-improvement—as for me it is too late; wherefore we are alike in the calm of our self-content. What others may think or say about us is a subject of the smallest concern to us. Therefore they generally speak well of us; for there is little satisfaction in speaking ill of men who care nothing for your opinion of them. Then, too, we are content to be where we happen to be —a fact that we did not order in the beginning and need not now

concern

concern ourselves about. Consider the eternal coming and going of folk. On every road many are travelling one way and an equal number are travelling the other way. It is obvious that, if they were all content to remain at the places whence they set forth, the distribution of the population would be the same. Why therefore move hither and yon at the cost of much time and labour and money, since nothing is accomplished thereby? We spare ourselves by being content to remain where we are. We thereby have the more time for

reflection

reflection. Nor can we help observing with a smile that all persons who have good reasons to see us themselves make the necessary journey after they discover that we remain fixed.

Again, people about us are continually doing this service and that for some other people—running errands, mending fences, bearing messages, building, and tearing down; and they all demand equal service in return. Thus a large part of mankind keeps itself in constant motion like bubbles of water racing around a pool at the foot of a

water-fall

water-fall—or like rabbits hurrying into their warrens and immediately hurrying out again. Whereas, while these antics amuse and sadden us, we for the most part remain where we are. Hence our wants are few; they are generally most courteously supplied without our asking; or, if we happen to be momentarily forgotten, we can quickly secure anything in the neighbourhood by a little judicious squalling. Why, then, should we whirl as bubbles or scurry as rabbits? Our conquering self-possession gives a masterful charm to life that

that the victims of perpetual locomotion never seem to attain.

You have discovered, and my experience confirms yours, that a perpetual self-consciousness brings most of the misery of this world. Men see others who are richer than they; or more famous, or more fortunate—so they think; and they become envious. You have not reached the period of such empty vanity, and I have long passed it. Let us, therefore, make our mutual vows not to be disturbed by the good luck or the good graces of others, but to continue, instead,

to

to contemplate the contented cat on the rug and the unenvious sky that hangs over all alike.

This mood will continue to keep our lives simple. Consider our diet. Could anything be simpler or better? We are not even tempted by the poisonous victuals wherewith mankind destroys itself. The very first sound law of life is to look to the belly; for it is what goes into a man that ruins him. By avoiding murderous food, we may hope to become centenarians. And why not? The golden streets will not be torn up and

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we need be in no indecent haste to travel even on them. The satisfactions of this life are just beginning for us; and we shall be wise to endure this world for as long a period as possible.

And sleep is good—long sleep and often; and your age and mine permit us to indulge in it without the sneers of the lark or the cock or the dawn.

I pray you, sir, therefore, accept my homage as the philosopher that you are and my assurance of that high esteem indicated by my faithful imitation of your virtues. I am,

With

With the most distinguished consideration,

With the sincerest esteem, and

With the most affectionate good wishes,

Sir,

Your proud,

Humble,

Obedient

GRANDDADDY.

To Master Walter Hines Page,
On Christmas, 1915.

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